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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the factors involved in the adjustment of children who must live with grandparents. Some studies indicate these children may be at higher risk for the development of psychopathology and pre-delinquent behavior. In contrast, other studies seem to indicate the love and care of supportive grandparents can lessen the impact of a previously discordant family. The paper summarizes three themes from the literature concerning grandparents: (1) When children with absent parents live with their grandparents, they are much more vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems; (2) high quality parent-child relationships reduce the impact of stress on children; and (3) the grandparent-grandchild relationship may provide a significant nurturing and buffering environment for children living with them. Recent studies explored the adjustment of grandchildren being raised by grandparents and found two important factors: (1) the quality of the relationship; and (2) the income level. Two studies performed imply that children can achieve a relatively problem free adjustment when living with caring grandparents. The paper cautions that these results should not be generalized since the sample population was quite small and not randomly selected, and the quality of relationship scores were skewed. Contains 29 references. (KM)

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Across all segments of our society, increasing numbers of children are being raised by other relatives, frequently grandparents, due to the incapacity of the natural parents to care for them (Kennedy, & Keeney, 1988, Nathan, 1990). The Bureau of Census reported in 1990 that 3.2 million children under the age of 18 years were living in their grandparents' homes. This is equivalent to about 5% of all children in the U.S. Of these, 30% had neither parent living with them in the grandparental home. Current Census Bureau estimates suggest that well over one million children are being exclusively raised by grandparents.

Larsen (1990) and Smolowe (1990) both have reported that these children are usually living with their grandparents due to a variety of social problems including abandonment, parents' incarceration, mental illness, physical and sexual abuse and, most frequently, drug abuse. Concomitantly, all these factors have been implicated in the development of psychopathology and pre-delinquent behavior in children (Henggeler, 1989; Rickel & Allen, 1987). Consequently, there is an increasing population of children who are in danger of developing serious emotional and behavioral problems.

Considerable theory development and empirical research have been directed at understanding children's reactions to a variety of events including divorce, marital discord, family violence, neglect and abuse (Emery, 1989). Particular attention has been focused on what has been termed the "intergenerational transmission" of various maladaptive behaviors such as substance abuse, child and spousal abuse, psychiatric disorders, and marital disharmony (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). Kazdin (1987) noted that psychopathology in parents places children at risk for general psychological disturbance. For example, criminal behavior and alcoholism in fathers have been associated with conduct disorders in their children (Rutter & Giller, 1983; West, 1982). The exact method of transmission of behavior problems between generations is the subject of some debate in the current literature (DiLalla & Gottesman, 1991). Willis and Holden (1990) described a variety of etiological factors contributing to deviant development. Several are biological and can be related to either genetic or prenatal factors. For instance, prenatal nutrition of the mother, including complications of drug or alcohol use, has been associated with a variety of adjustment problems including poor school adjustment, developmental disorders, hyperactivity, and conduct disorders. These researchers pointed out that the drug-addicted mother is typically more inept, has fewer personal resources, and exhibits

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personality deviancies that may interact with the child's physiologic impairment to further compromise development. Research on the effects of domestic violence, which is often experienced by this group of children before placement with grandparents, similarly suggest a guarded developmental prognosis. Several studies have shown that children who observe violence directed solely at their mothers are as likely as abused children to show subsequent violent behavior (Christopoulos et al., 1987, Kalmuss, 1984). Emery (1989) noted that empirical research has shown that outcomes of abuse in childhood are diverse and may include increased aggression, depression, problems in peer relationships, lack of empathy, and lower performance on cognitive tasks. Furthermore, Egeland, Stroufe, and Erickson (1983) found evidence that neglected children may be more disturbed than abused children.

Emotional discord, frequent changes of residence, and other stressful experiences, which are ubiquitous features of life in these children's nuclear families, may contribute to adjustment disorders as well. In a review of research concerning life stressors in childhood and adolescence, Johnson (1986) described several studies that found strong correlations between significant life stressors and child adjustment. The results of several studies have suggested that there may be interaction effects between chronic "stress processes" such as family discord and specific stressful life events such as divorce, incarceration of a parent, or changing residence (Heisel, Ream, Raitz, Rappaport & Coddington, 1973). Rae-Grant, Boyle, Offord, and Thomas (1984) found that the more stress factors in a child's life (e.g., parent-child separation, domestic violence, parental deviance), the greater is the child's risk for adjustment problems.

In contrast to the grim prospects implied for these children by the foregoing, some research findings suggest that the physical and emotional support the children receive from their caregiving grandparents may mitigate the negative effects of their earlier experiences. In separate studies, Barrera (1981) and Greenberg and colleagues (1983) found that social support, especially support from family, can moderate the impact of stressful experiences in both children and adolescents. Greenberg et al. measured the affective quality of both parental and peer relationships as moderating variables affecting the impact of stressful events upon adolescents. It was found that high quality affective relationships with parents buffered adolescents from the negative effects of stress. Research is needed to determine if this effect extends to the caregiving grandparent and grandchild relationship.

Historically, little research attention has been paid to the grandparent role within the family (Bengtson & Robertson, 1985; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). Tinsley & Parke (1984) have suggested that there is a theoretical assumption that the mother-child dyad is the most important relationship in a child's development and this belief may have contributed to a lack of focus upon other potentially influential relationships. Without challenging this assumption, it is nevertheless clear that when both the mother and father are physically or emotionally absent, other relationships must assume greater centrality. Children's services workers, psychologists, and courts are often faced with deciding which among other available relationships can be most beneficial to abandoned children.

There is a growing body of research literature which may provide useful information regarding this question. Kornhaber and Woodward (1981) studied the role of grandparent within the context of contemporary family life and concluded that, although frequently unrealized, the bond between grandparents and grandchildren was second in emotional power and influence only to that between children and their natural parents. More recently, several researchers (Bengtson & Robertson, 1985; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Thomas, 1989) have recognized grandparenthood in general as an important life experience which provides psychological benefits to grandparents and grandchildren.

The work of several researchers in the areas of life span development and family roles suggests that grandparents may be uniquely qualified to provide care and nurturance in the absence of natural parents. Thomas (1986) in a series of large studies of grandparents found a high degree of personal satisfaction derived from the experience of responsibility for grandchildren's care. She opined that for men especially this may be facilitated by a normal increase in desire to nurture which occurs at mid-life. Others (Kimmel, 1974; Erikson, 1968; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986) have described the developmental need in both men and women at mid-life to provide responsible nurturance to those younger as a balance to earlier stages of life characterized with more self-absorption.

Bengston (1985), in examining the significance of grandparents within the family, identified several important functions which grandparents play including the role of family "watchdog." In this role the grandparent provides protection and nurturance and is a potential deterrent to family disruption. Similarly, Burton (1991), discussing the intergenerational roles which grandparents assume within families, identified the role of "kinkeeper." The kinkeeper is a dependable and respected family member who helps to maintain family integrity and who increasingly is called upon to care for other family members' children (p. 322).

In summary, three themes relevant to the population under consideration are posited by the literature briefly reviewed:

a. Children who are placed with their grandparents due to their parents' incapacity to provide care, are at high risk to develop serious emotional and behavioral maladjustment;

b. Earlier research suggests that affectively high quality parent-child relationships seem to buffer children from the impact of a variety of stressors;

c. Though historically seldom considered, the grandparent-grandchild relationship may provide a significant nurturing and buffering environment for children living with them.

Recently, Jones (1992) found a significant correlation between the adjustment of children being raised by their grandparents and two factors: the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship and family incomes above the poverty level. In that study, grandparents having one or more grandchildren living with them who were between the ages of 4 and 18 years were

solicited from three counties in Southern California. Respondents completed a demographic questionnaire that included a measure of the relationship quality between grandparent and grandchild (Gronvold, 1988), and the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1990). Initial examination of the data revealed extreme differences in income levels between Caucasian and minority respondents. Since family income is known to be a variable affecting measures of adjustment in children, the sample was restricted to Caucasian families. Relationships between child adjustment and several variables were examined using a hierarchical multiple regression procedure. Grandparent-grandchild relationship quality and grandparent income above the poverty level accounted for 34% of the variance in grandchild adjustment.

The current study examined the ongoing adjustment of a small sample of the original group of children. Taken together, the two studies attempted to address the following research questions:

1. Do Caucasian children who are placed with their grandparents achieve a positive behavioral and emotional adjustment?

2. What factors seem to mediate positive adjustment in these children?

3. Is the children's adjustment durable over time?

PROCEDURE:

Data for the earlier study (Jones, 1992) was collected in the summer of 1991. Included in the original questionnaire was an invitation for the respondents to provide their names and addresses so that they could receive a summary of results and be given the opportunity to participate in future studies. Of the 51 families in the original sample, name and address information was only available for 22 of them. These families were contacted by mail and asked to participate in this two-year follow-up study by forwarding the Teacher Report Form (Achenbach, 1991) to their grandchildren's teachers. Self-addressed envelopes were provided for the teachers' responses. Using this procedure, teacher evaluations of 12 children were received.

The Teacher Report Forms (TRF) were scored using computer software supplied by the publisher. These scores were then referenced to the 1991 data for each child. Included in that data were the age and gender of each grandchild; duration of residence with the grandparent; history of psychological treatment of the grandchild since coming to live with the grandparent; grandparent's age, gender, marital status, occupation, and ethnic background; household composition and total income; frequency of visits by the birth parents; the grandchild's custody status, and the grandparent's perception of the stability of the custody status. Also in the data base were measures of the affective quality of the grandparent-birth parent nd grandparent-grandchild relationships (Gronvold, 1988).

The original study had used a correlational design to determine whether child adjustment was mediated by the family and relationship variables measured. Data analysis was by means of a hierarchical multiple regression technique. This regression model was chosen because it allows for the evaluation of variables based upon reality constraints and theoretical considerations. Consequently, the prediction equation generated is not only statistically justifiable, but also meaningful to the research questions being evaluated. That analysis revealed that the affectively high quality relationship between grandparent and grandchild and grandparent income accounted for 34% of the variance in child adjustment. No other variables contributed significantly to the prediction equation. The present study used the same method of analysis to determine whether relationship quality predicted child adjustment and whether other variables also contributed to the variance in child adjustment scores. T score equivalents of the total problem scores from the TRF were used as the measure of child adjustment.

RESULTS:

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for several key variables. The children averaged seven years of age and their grandparents average age was 58 years. The children had been living with the grandparents for an average of five years. The grandparent's income ranged from $16,500.00 to over $52,000.00. The average reported income was approximately $44,500.00 which is slightly above the mean income for the geographic area in which the families lived and well above the poverty level for the area (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Los Angeles Office, April 25, 1993).

Table 1
Description of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Grandchild age (years)	7	1.0	5	11
Grandparent age (years)	58	7.0	48	69
Time with Grandparent (years)	5	2.0	4	10
Income range (dollars)	44,500	---	16,500	>52,000
Affective quality*	13	3.0	6	15
TRF Total Problem T score**	47	17.0	37	66

* Possible range of scores: 0-18
** Scores of 70 and above are clinically significant

The mean total problem T score reported by the children's teachers was 47, well below the level of clinical significance set by the author (Achenbach, 1991). Scores on the measure of relationship quality can range from 0-18; higher scores indicate higher affective quality (Gronvold, 1988). Scores for this sample averaged 13.

Examination of the distribution of values for several key variables revealed that the relationship quality scores tended to be clustered toward the higher possible values; for all other variables, where an assumption of normal distribution is necessary for statistical tests, the distribution was reasonably even. This fact raises some question about the statistical appropriateness of using methods of analysis designed for samples that are assumed to come from a normal population. The data were therefore analyzed using methods suited for both score and also ordinal data. The more conservative or restrictive approach involved converting the relationship quality scores to three ordinal ranks and computing a Spearman rho.

Table 2 reports the correlation coefficients for key variables. An inverse correlation exists between the TRF scores and the relationship quality scores. The correlation coefficient of -.67 is significant beyond the .05 level of confidence. No other key variables achieved significance. Spearman rho was calculated at -.39 which is below the critical value for significance. However, analysis of variance of the three ordinal groups of relationship quality scores did reveal a significant difference between the groups in the expected direction ($f=4.90$, $p< .05$). Thus, keeping in mind the question of mathematical appropriateness, a multiple regression equation was calculated using the TRF total problem T score as the dependant variable and the other key variables listed in Table 1 as predictors. Only the grandparent-grandchild relationship entered into the equation. This factor predicted 39% of the variance with the child adjustment score ($f = 6.10$, df 1, $p < .05$).

Table 2
Correlations between Key Variables and TRF Scores

Variable	r-value
Grandchild age	.11
Grandparent age	-0.03
Income level	-0.27
Time with grandparent	-0.30
Grandparent-grandchild relationship	-0.67*

* $p < .05$

DISCUSSION:

This study explored the adjustment of Caucasian children who are being raised exclusively by their grandparents. Several variables that might mediate their adjustment were also examined. The results were consistent with findings from a previous study (Jones, 1992), where both family income and the affective quality grandparent-grandchild relationship were found to be significant predictors of child adjustment as measured by the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). In the current study, these same children's adjustment was rated by their classroom teachers using the Teacher Report Form developed by Achenbach (1991), an

instrument shown to have a high correlation with the Child Behavior Checklist and other objective measures of behavioral and emotional adjustment. The current data were collected approximately two years after the original data collection and thus represented an opportunity to evaluate the children's longer term adjustment. In view of the family background factors and highly stressful life experiences that predispose them to a higher potential for behavioral and emotional maladjustment, finding that some of these children achieve and maintain a measurably problem free adjustment is important in itself. It is especially gratifying that the results of both studies also strongly implicate a high quality relationship between caregiving grandparent and grandchild as a variable mediating good adjustment.

There are major obstacles that limit generalizing the current results. These include the problem of a very small, non-random sample drawn from a limited geographic area, as well as the skewed distribution of scores on the measure of relationship quality. The results are nevertheless useful in several meaningful ways. Viewed together with earlier findings, the present data suggest that grandparent reared children can and do overcome many factors in their histories that predispose them to maladjustment. The finding that higher affective quality in grandparent-grandchild relationships may mediate positive child adjustment is consistent with previous research (Barrera, 1981; Greenberg et al, 1983). The results suggest that a strong and supportive relationship between grandparent and grandchild may offer a protection from the adverse effects of stress in a manner similar to that found with higher quality relationships between parent and child. Finally, while several studies have examined demographic, relationship and behavioral adjustment variables in grandparent head of household families from predominately black, urban settings (Minkler & Roe, 19993), few have explored this growing phenomenon in white, upper income suburban neighborhoods.

Given that the number of children in the U.S. being raised by their grandparents is now estimated to be over one million and growing, a more thorough understanding of this at risk population is warranted and should be undertaken. Many factors, such as the stressful life circumstances of these families, limit the ease with which information about their experiences can be gained. Survey methods of data collection are, consequently, of limited usefulness. A method using interviewers trained to develop supportive rapport with respondents is therefore recommended for future research with this population. Furthermore, a larger sample, drawn from a more diverse group of families, would likely result greater variability of scores on measures of relationship quality thereby maximizing the options for data analysis and enabling greater generalization of findings. In consideration of the growing numbers of children whose parents are incapable of providing adequate care, and due to the substantial risks for these children to develop behavioral and emotional problems, funding for a large scale study by academic or federal institutions is not only warranted, but would represent a good investment in the future.

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